

学校编码: 10384
学号: 11120051300311

分类号__密级__
UDC__

廈門大學

硕士学位论文

Metadiscourse in English Cover Letters

英文求职信中的元话语

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论文提交时间: 2008 年 5 月

论文答辩日期: 2008 年 6 月

学位授予日期: 2008 年 月

答辩委员会主席: __

评阅人: __

2008 年 4 月

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Synopsis

Metadiscourse, as a relatively new concept in discourse analysis, is becoming a highly dynamic topic in recent years. Recent studies have proved its importance in a range of genres and settings. Under the theoretical framework of Hyland's interpersonal model of metadiscourse, the current study carries out a comprehensive and in-depth analysis, both qualitatively and quantitatively, of how metadiscourse helps establish interpersonal interaction between the writer and the reader and how metadiscourse enables the writer to convey his persuasive message. Thus it adds to our knowledge of metadiscourse use in English cover letters. It is hoped that the result of the current study might be used to guide Chinese English learners, especially those who are learning to write English cover letters.

The findings show that metadiscourse is frequently used in English cover letters. The writer uses more interactional metadiscourse than interactive metadiscourse. Among all the metadiscourse subcategories, self-mentions, transitions and hedges are frequently used. Additionally, the findings also show that all metadiscourse resources seem to stress the interpersonal potential in order to convey a persuasive message under an informative mask.

Based on the different distribution of metadiscourse in English cover letters, the present study holds that metadiscourse use is genre-constrained and the writer's writing purpose.

Key words: metadiscourse; English cover letters; interpersonal interaction

摘要

元话语作为话语分析领域内一个较新的概念，近年来正成为研究的焦点。许多研究已经证明了元话语在不同文体中的重要性。本文在海兰德元话语人际模式分类的框架下，通过定量和定性分析的方法，调查分析了元话语在英文求职信中的使用情况和分布特征。一方面，本文旨在揭示元话语如何帮助建立作者与读者之间的人际互动关系；以及元话语如何帮助作者传达劝说信息，从而增强我们对元话语使用的认识。另一方面，本文旨在为中国学生学习书写英文求职信提供有益的借鉴。

研究表明，英文求职信中大量存在元话语。其中，互动元话语的比重远远高于交互元话语。在十类元话语的次范畴中，自我提及语，连接语和模糊语呈现的频率较高。此外，本研究结果也表明，所有的元话语资源都强调了人际互动潜能。

基于元话语在英文求职信中的不同分布特征，本文认为元话语的使用受其所属的文体限制和写作目的影响。

关键词：元话语；英文求职信；人际互动

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Chapter 1 Introduction

As a relatively new concept, the term ‘metadiscourse’ was adopted in discourse studies in the mid-1980s. Traditionally, metadiscourse has been regarded as an umbrella term, which is often simply characterized as ‘discourse about discourse’ or ‘talk about talk’. Metadiscourse, however, has contributed to a range of recent work in text^① analysis, ranging from the properties of texts, participant interactions, historical linguistics, cross-cultural variations and writing pedagogy (Hyland 2004). Metadiscourse is becoming a highly dynamic topic in text research, “which is increasingly important to research in composition, reading and text structure” (Hyland 1998: 437).

This part will give a brief introduction to the background of the current study, research objectives, research methodology and the organization of the thesis.

1.1 Background

The term ‘metadiscourse’ is not always used in the same way and undergone different vagaries. As a fuzzy term, metadiscourse has been called divergently as ‘gambits’ (Keller 1979); ‘frames’ (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974); ‘metatalk’ (Schiffrin 1980; Storch 1999; Crosmay 2006); ‘alignment’ (Ragan & Hopper 1981); ‘evidentials’ (Chafe 1986); ‘reflexivity in language’ (Mauranen 1993a); ‘metatext’ (e.g. Mauranen 1993b; Valero-Garces 1996; Bunton 1999; Moreno 2003; Peterlin 2005), and metadiscourse has been used by most of researchers (e.g. Williams 1981; Vande Kopple 1985; Crismore 1989; Luukka 1992; Hyland 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005; Ifantidou 2005). The term ‘metadiscourse’ is used in the current study.

Metadiscourse can be realized in a variety of ways, ranging from morphemes, single word forms, phrases, clauses, to strings of sentences. Metadiscourse has also been seen as linked to punctuation, to typographic markers such as parentheses and underlining (Hyland 1999), and to visual, non-linguistic design features such as

^① This study does not set any clear-cut line between discourse and text. They are interchangeably used, referred to the written or spoken language for the convenience of writing or collocation.

paragraph indentations, structure layout, consistency of tone (of the text) with format or with quality of paper-printing among other things (Kumpf 2000). In other words, metadiscourse includes not only verbal metadiscourse but also visual metadiscourse. According to Kumpf (2000), visual metadiscourse also facilitates the reader to understand the writer and the text. Although visual metadiscourse (such as italicizing, bolding, capitalization, underlining, bullets and front size) appears in the collected data, it should be mentioned that the present study will consider only verbal metadiscourse.

Recently, considerable attention has been given to metadiscourse in a range of genres and settings. There has been a great deal of work on academic discourse, including research articles (Swales 1990; Mauranen 1993a; 1993b; Hyland 1998), school textbooks (Crismore 1989), university textbooks (Hyland 1999), EAP textbooks (Moreno 2003), postgraduate dissertations (Bunton 1999; Hyland 2004; Swales 1990), and L2 lecture comprehension (Thompson 2003). Similarly, academic discourse has also been investigated with respect to intercultural variation (Mauranen 1993a; Crismore et al 1993; Valero-Garces 1996). In addition, other studies focus on the importance of metadiscourse in students' coursework in writing and composition (Williams 1981; Vande Kopple 1985), and also appear to be a critical feature of good ESL and native-speaker student writing (Crismore et al 1993; Intaraprawat & Steffensen 1995; Cheng & Steffensen 1996; Cheng 1997), and ESP reading comprehension in Camiciottoli's (2003) research. Most recently, studies have also been given to metadiscourse in genre-specific analysis, including advertisements (Fuertes-Olivera et al 2001), business letters (Vergaro 2002, 2004), company annual reports (Hyland 1998), and editorials (Le 2004).

Although metadiscourse is abundant and pervasive in everyday discourse and has also been widely investigated from a wide range of perspectives, metadiscourse phenomena are not yet fully explored. Researchers do not even agree on what metadiscourse is, nor have they sufficiently clarified how it works in general, how it varies across genres, or how it differs across languages (Adel 2006). In other words, the theory of metadiscourse is still under construction. Some researchers (Beauvais 1989; Mao 1993; Hyland & Tse 2004; Hyland 2005) have pointed to the lack of a solid theoretical basis for metadiscourse. In Hyland's (2005: ix) words, "metadiscourse remains under-theorized and empirically vague. [...] This lack of theoretical rigor and

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